

'll bet you didn't guess my answer: bruised limbs!

I've avoided jumping on the "Think Different" bandwagon. First off, as copy editor, I recoil at the poor English. Think is a verb. Different is an adjective. Adjectives modify nouns, not verbs. The phrase should be "Think Differently." That said, I've fulfilled my obligation to the "acAdemia" portion of my column!

Events unfolding in my life since Christmas have forced me to "Think Different." Since I've been busy "thinking different" about virtually everything from the definition of family to how to maneuver a motorcycle through an intersection, I'll jump on the bandwagon with this month's column.

My household is undergoing drastic change. I'm welcoming "Morticia," a 1996 BMW R1100RT motorcycle, into my life. People who are not motorcycling enthusiasts might think it heretical to consider a motorcycle as a family member, but true motorcyclists will understand. Perhaps some readers have some other types of not-so-inanimate belongings that they consider family.

Morticia

Intruder

My previous “steed” is a Suzuki Intruder, a cruiser bike. It’s a very different animal from the full-fledged touring design of the BMW as you can see from the photos. I will be learning many new things in 1998. I’ve already learned that it’s expensive to drop a BMW. Dropping a bike is an embarrassing experience under the best of circumstances. It’s already happened with Morticia. I think it was her way of informing me who is really “the boss.”

It was raining steadily the first time I “met” Morticia. Her owner and I had already talked about her extensively. A friend of mine who owns the same model bike had just ridden her about 15 miles. He gave her his seal of approval, mechanically-speaking. It was my turn to take her out for a test ride.

My first hurdle was getting her off the center stand.

Let me explain. Motorcycles have side stands that keep them upright when parked, just like bicycles. However, their extra weight makes relying solely on a side stand a risky proposition. Take parking on grass, for example. Lean a 550+ pound vehicle at an angle on dirt where the entire weight of the bike rests on a metal rod whose footprint is less than one square inch. It won’t be long before the bike is horizontal instead of almost vertical. A bike laying on its side gives the owner (and any other motorcyclist) a sickening feeling in the pit of their stomach.

To provide more secure footing when immobile, most sport and touring motorcycles (cruisers are a notable exception, probably because their centers of gravity are much lower) are equipped with center stands. When a bike is on its center stand, it is raised up about 2-3 inches. The back tire usually rests on the ground, while the front tire is elevated. The center stand and one tire form a tripod, which is why it is more stable than a side stand.

To get the bike off center stand, you have to roll it forward. There are at least two ways one can accomplish this feat. One is to sit on the bike and rock it forward. This looks a little like someone riding a stubborn mule who won’t budge. That first moment when the bike comes off the center stand is a dicey one if the height of the bike is at the rider’s maximum. Two-wheeled vehicles are most unstable when they are still or moving very slowly. Anyone who has ridden a bicycle knows that.

Here I was, with an audience of four extremely experienced male motorcyclists, taking a bike worth over \$12K off its center stand. It was only slightly intimidating. I rocked forward several times before I was successful, but the bike remained upright. My next challenge was to move the bike about 10 feet forward so that another bike could exit the garage.

I slowly let out the clutch. The gears engaged and I was moving. The driveway sloped downhill for about 12 feet, then turned very sharply to the left. The lot was wooded and the leaves were deep right up to the driveway’s edge. It was time to stop. Suddenly I realized I hadn’t been paying attention to the position of the front wheel. Had I started turning? Was it straight? Darn!! I can’t see it. The fairing’s in the way!

On a cruiser, the front wheel is always visible to the driver. You’re not conscious of this fact until it’s no longer true. It’s important that the front wheel is pointed straight ahead when you stop a bike. Why? Because if it’s turned, the bike will tend to lean in the direction the wheel is pointing. With a short driver on a heavy bike, a turned wheel usually equals a dropped bike.

In my momentary panic, I forgot where my feet were about to plant. I braked, the bike came to a halt, my left foot went down and instead of pavement, landed on wet leaves. My foot

slid and the bike went down.

I can still see it in my mind's eye. Like many accidents, the sequence of events seems to replay like a video in frame-by-frame editing mode. The hardsided saddle bag touched the asphalt first. Fortunately, the OEM bumper guarded its custom-painted surface from damage. Then the front mirror hit the ground. Fiberglass against asphalt makes a sound that's as piercing as fingernails on a chalkboard. The glass and the turn signal lens shattered as the full weight of the bike bore down.

Like it or not, Morticia was mine. If you drop a bike you're test riding, it's yours (after you hand over the purchase price, of course). I was unnerved and more embarrassed than I'd like to admit, but after we righted Morticia and checked out her components, I did take her out for a ride. Blemished, yet still beautiful, she is truly the "ultimate riding machine" in my opinion.

I'm writing this while driving home from Chattanooga with "Morticia" riding atop the trailer. She's a beautiful machine, shining bright blue under an equally beautiful cloudless sun-filled sky (now!!). If it were a perfect world, I'd be riding her and not typing on my laptop. It may not be a perfect world, but it's fine by me.

I've written in previous columns about my involvement on a committee at my academic institution that deals with the planned distribution of laptops to all our students entering this August as the Class of 2002. Besides distributing laptops (unfortunately, they're not Macs), we're actively revamping the entire curriculum. Our goal is to be one of the leaders in laptop education. Lotus Notes will be the groupware product through which content will be delivered and taught in a networked environment.

This means that the traditional desktop will become the place upon which our students and faculty use their laptops. I have been using a Powerbook 3400c for all of my work and personal computing for about eight months now. I use it everywhere. It gets booted up in the car, in the deli around the corner from the studio where my daughter takes dance, art, and drama classes, on the sidelines of the soccer practice and game fields, in campgrounds, on the sofa, and occasionally, on my work or home office desktop!

We're getting down to the nitty-gritty of training issues and infrastructure in committee meetings. Anyone who has used a laptop for any length of time knows that there are a few differences between laptop and desktop computing. There are the trivial things, like having a single command key instead of two (those command-P's really stretch the fingers!). There are also more annoying differences, which might be alleviated if someone would just build a better desktop!

I'm offering this column as a gift to some enterprising ATPM reader. What follows are my thoughts about what would be, for me, an oasis of laptop computing. I love the convenience of being able to work virtually anywhere, so I'm willing to put up with occasional discomfort. However, there is no place where I feel totally at ease with this wonder of silicon-based engineering. If anyone out there decides to build upon my idea, I would appreciate receiving at least a prototype as commission. It's an honor system. I have faith. Thanks in advance.

Three things annoy me most about laptop use in my existing office setup. First, my arms get uncomfortable. Even though those cute little feet that pop out of my PowerBook make my colleagues with Thinkpads terribly jealous, they don't solve the problem completely. Wrist rests designed for desktop keyboards don't work well because it's not my wrists that need support. My arms hit the edge of the desktop at a point about 3 inches distal to my elbows. Wrist rests aren't that wide and even if I put two side-by-side, they don't stay on the edge

where I need them. Besides, they put my arms at an awful angle relative to my shoulders.

Second, valuable desktop space is taken up by my printer cable and surge protection power strip, because the computer is constantly being connected and disconnected. Third, logging onto the Internet is a real pain because the phone jack is in an inconvenient place for repeatedly plugging and unplugging my internal modem's special cord.

Clearly, a workspace design that's efficient for laptop use differs significantly from the more traditional format that blends well with desktop computer use.

If I could change the design of my PowerBook, I'd love to be able to unhook the monitor half of my folding laptop and mount it at eye level (Duo, a dear...a pun for all Mac-using Sound of Music fans). A pedestal that could accept the monitor and be adjusted for height, tilt angle, and swivel would be ideal. Mr. Jobs, if you're reading this, I'd appreciate it if you had a discussion with your hardware engineers...

Desktop design is more amenable to customization than the computer. Since the pedestal idea is not feasible (yet), I think a circular floating platform for the laptop would be fun. It would have to be round, so it could rotate side to side. The ideal monitor viewing position is rather limited and I don't want to be forced into sitting at a particular angle.

The front edge of the circular platform would be 12 to 14 inches from the front edge of the desk, so my entire forearm would be supported while typing. This edge would also be set below the rest of the desktop about 3/4 of an inch. There would be a thin, raised rim along the circle, so the laptop would be positioned about 1/2" back from the edge. This would allow for easy mouse clicking. However, to keep the monitor from sitting any lower than it does currently, the back edge of the platform should be even with the desktop surface. This design also ensures that cords coming out of the back of the computer are not stressed (especially SCSI!).

Speaking of cords, here's my ideal solution to that conundrum. I'd install a sliding door (it would open by sliding toward the back) on the desktop. When open, it would reveal a recessed compartment containing a phone jack and several surge-protected outlets with enough extra space to store the "brick" and extra cord from the AC adaptor. The printer cord could emerge from the compartment and be plugged into the back of the computer. The sliding door would have a notch at its front edge (which would be invisible when the compartment was empty) so the door could be closed while the laptop and/or modem were plugged in.

Wires to connect the compartment's phone jack and outlets to wall receptacles would emerge at the back of the desk. I envision a space about 4 inches deep along the entire underbelly of the desktop for power and phone connections. I'd install a metal bar along the back with holes, so that power cords could be coiled and secured with tie wraps (better yet, the desk could come with a selection of clips, like shower curtain holders, that could be repeatedly opened and closed).

I'd install a second sliding door for the printer. The plastic extension built into StyleWriter printers to catch outgoing paper is ugly and legal-sized sheets don't fit very well. Furthermore, it isn't deep enough to hold the number of sheets that can be loaded into the feeder tray. If you leave unattended a print job of more than 25 letter-sized (or as few as 5 legal-sized), the printer's outlet will become blocked. On my ideal desktop, a second recessed compartment would accommodate a minimum of 100 legal pages. The door shouldn't have to be opened fully to print. The printer could live in a slightly recessed space so the outflow of print jobs would feed into a partially open compartment.

There you have it. Please e-mail me with some sketches and I'll send the address where you can deliver the prototype. Please hurry. My arms are killing me.

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